

Vita: Chauncey Wright Brief Life of an “Indolent Genius”: 1830–1875

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For much of the twentieth century the philosophy of science has followed an agenda set by philosophers of physics and mathematics. These advocates of “logical positivism,” possessed by a vision of the unity of science and the uniformity of scientific method, ordered the fields of knowledge according to their success in approximating the physical ideal. But philosophy has had other exemplars at other times, and just as twentieth-century positivism drew its strength from physics, so its nineteenth-century predecessor, the American school of pragmatism, found inspiration in the new science of Darwinian evolution. The founders of pragmatism—Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., among others—met in Cambridge during the early 1870s in a group that came to be called the Metaphysical Club. The oldest member of this group and its intellectual mentor was a congenial and somewhat eccentric man named Chauncey Wright. Peirce judged him to be a thinker “of the order of John Stuart Mill” and called him “our boxing-master.”

Wright was born in Northampton, Massachusetts, the son of Ansel Wright, deputy sheriff and merchant, and his wife, Elizabeth Boleyn. In school the young Wright excelled in mathematics and became acquainted early with evolutionary ideas through *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, a widely-read pre-Darwinian evolutionary tract that had been published anonymously in 1844. The generosity of a Northampton patron enabled Wright to attend Harvard, and he graduated in the class of 1852 with no particular distinction. In jest his friends voted him “homeliest man in the class.”

By all reports Wright was completely lacking in worldly ambition. His one passion was philosophical dialogue, and in this, reports agree, he had no equal. Well-placed friends like William James, who had long admired Wright’s theoretical skills, tried to secure a teaching position for him at Harvard, but Wright couldn’t adapt the informal agility that his advanced colleagues admired to the formal requirements of lecturing. He did receive two part-time appointments, but his students complained that he spoke in a monotone, and the dean reluctantly concluded that Wright’s “heavy artillery was mostly directed over their heads.” He supported himself by working as a “computer” for the *Nautical Almanac*, where he was able to do twelve months’ worth of calculations in three and devote the remainder of the year to philosophy.

Wright’s ideas and opinions came to be known to the wider community of scholars primarily through the critical essays he published in the *North American Review* and *The Nation*. Even these essays did not flow naturally from his pen: most of them were forcibly extracted by Charles Eliot Norton, the *Review*’s editor. A vigorous

defender of Darwin from the first appearance of *On the Origin of Species*, Wright upheld in his writings not only the theory of descent, which met with quick and widespread acceptance, but also Darwin’s evolutionary mechanism, natural selection, the fortunes of which varied considerably for many years. Wright’s particularly forceful attack on St. George Mivart’s anti-selectionist book *The Genesis of Species* so pleased Darwin himself that he arranged to have it reprinted in England at his own expense and welcomed Wright into his home at Down in 1872 on Wright’s only trip overseas.

In one of his most important essays, written in 1870, Wright applied the idea of natural selection in a new context, using it to explain the psychological development of the individual through the variation and selection of ideas. In this work Wright prefigured aspects of the field known today as evolutionary epistemology. And like modern natural historians, Wright had little sympathy for the foremost “evolutionary philosopher” of his day, the Englishman Herbert Spencer, whose popular systems of universal teleology he regarded as little more than theology in disguise. In sharp contrast to Spencer, Wright described the history of nature as a kind of a-teleological “cosmic weather,” ever changing but never tending anywhere and never significantly predictable.

In spite of Wright’s acknowledged brilliance, the promise his friends saw in him was in the end never completely fulfilled. Happy only when in conversation, he never became a skillful writer and was plagued off and on throughout his life by depression. A heavy smoker and from time to time a heavy drinker as well, Wright suffered a stroke at his desk late in the night of September 11, 1875, and died the next day in his 45th year.

“Chauncey Wright entered the American philosophical scene,” said philosopher Morton White, “like one of those Darwinian variations about which he wrote so knowledgeably; and when he did, he started a new species of American philosopher.” As the positivist vision of science fades in the waning years of our century, the philosophical descendants of Chauncey Wright may come again to populate the evolving landscape of thought.

Opposite: A portrait of Wright once in the Smith College Library’s Pearson Collection, reproduced from Philip P. Wiener, “Chauncey Wright’s defense of Darwin and the neutrality of science,” Journal of the History of Ideas, volume six, number one (1945).

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